

JOHN VALENTINI

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John Valentini is a third generation owner of A. Cavalli & Co., an Italian bookstore in North Beach. The family bought the business from another Italian family, the Cavallis, in the late 1930's. The Cavallis had started it in 1880 to serve the San Francisco Italian community.

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TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS' ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

This interview is part of a series undertaken (1993-1996) by the Bancroft Library's Regional Oral History Program, University of California, Berkeley. Its focus was oral histories of Italian-Americans from San Francisco's North Beach District.

This interview was transcribed and edited by volunteers from the Telegraph Hill Dwellers' Oral History Project.

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PROJECT: TELEGRAPH HILL DWELLERS ORAL HISTORY

NARRATOR: John Valentini

INTERVIEW DATES: August 15, 1996

**INTERVIEWER: Judith Robinson for the Bancroft Library,
University of California**

TRANSCRIPT DATES: March and April, 2009

TRANSCRIBER: Rozell Overmire, Telegraph Hill Dwellers

PHOTO EDITOR: Peter Overmire

[]: Transcriber's Comments

[John Valentini recalls the origin of the store and its various moves to new locations. He tells us of his parents and grandparent's history and their work and training, and his start in the store in 1956. He gives a bit about his own involvement in the Italian Athletic Club, and his schooling and memories of growing up in San Francisco.]

[This oral history is not transcribed word for word from the audiotape. Notes were taken as the audiotape played. These notes are the following text.]

John J. Valentini, Owner, A. Cavalli Italian Bookstore
Notes on Oral History taken by Judith Robinson
August 15, 1996
Bancroft Library Phonotape 3846 C:27

This interview was taken in A. Cavalli Book Store, 1441 Stockton Street, San Francisco, CA.

Cavalli's has existed in San Francisco since 1880. It was started by Flavio Cavalli, nicknamed "George". He operated it until 1936 when the Valentini family bought it from him. Flavio's sister, Angelina, came from Italy (Ticino) to help with the business. It was on the first block of Columbus Avenue, [at 12 Montgomery Avenue], near where the Transamerica Building is today [Columbus Avenue was called Montgomery Avenue then]. The business is named A. Cavalli after Angelina. Flavio founded the first Italian/Swiss newspaper in California.

In 1888 Angelina Cavalli moved the bookstore to a larger storefront on Broadway and Grant Avenue, its second location [At 37-43 Montgomery Avenue]. This site was destroyed in the Earthquake and Fire of 1906. The business then started again in 1907 in its third location at 263 Columbus Avenue, the building where City Lights Bookstore is today. In 1917 it opened in a fourth location where the Vesivio Building is today, across from City Lights.

Finally in 1934 it came to its present location at 1441 Stockton Street, where the building owners named the building after the bookstore. The Valentini family does not own the building.

Angelina Cavalli married Luigi Giannone and together they operated the store. John's grandmother, Lena Masetti, worked for the Cavalli/Giannone couple. In the late 1930's John's step-grandfather and Lena bought the business. Lena worked 45 years there and just died at 98 a few years ago. Her daughter (and John's mother), Vanna Marani Valentini, married John P. Valentini. John P. and Lena worked together at the store, this is John J.'s father and grandmother. John P. came to work in the store in 1938 after graduating from St. Mary's College. In 1957 John P. bought the business. His son John J. started helping on Saturdays in 1956 and after Junior College and a short six month Army service, worked at the store. In 1978, John J. bought the business and he and his wife Rosanna have operated it to the present time. Rosanna is from Venice but they met in San Francisco. They sell books and newspapers from Italy. They carry seven to eight Italian dailies and one hundred Italian language magazines, also Italian music.

A little family history: John J.'s father was born in Chicago and his mother in Carrara, Tuscany, Italy. His father's family was from Lucca in northern Italy. His father lived, according to Dante Benedetti, in Jasper Alley next to the New Pisa Restaurant. And his grandmother was also from northern Italy. John J. was born at Union Street and Hyde in San Francisco, September 3, 1940 and when he was six his family moved to San Anselmo, California. Then in 1948 they moved back to the city, to the Sunset District where he grew up. He went to Sacred Heart High School and City College for two years. He was a North Beach Salesian Boy's Club member and a San Francisco Athletic Club member. He was sport manager of the Athletic Club in 1969-75 and on their Board of Directors and is still a member today. His step-grandfather (Renato Marrazzini) was the second President of the Athletic Club (which started in 1918). The club sponsors the Statuto, a footrace to celebrate when Italy was unified, every first Sunday in June. It is still done today and there were 100 runners this past year.

John remembers when the line for Oriental businesses was Broadway. Everything north of that was wall-to-wall Italian. His family used to shop for all their needs in the neighborhood. He remembers the fairs, the Columbus Day

Parade, the North Beach Festival in the 1950's and 1960's. He spoke only Italian at home, and in first grade the teacher called in his parents because he didn't understand a word of English. His school gave him special classes to help him learn English and catch up. His Italian was recharged when his grandmother took him to Italy for three months to visit family in Carrara. Working in the store helped keep his Italian language alive. His son, Eric, doesn't speak Italian. John goes to Italy about every other year to Venice and Milan and Tuscany. He feels however that, "the handwriting is on the wall" for small businesses in North Beach.

Music was a family passion. They attended the Opera in the Milano Theater. Also performances were in the building where the funeral parlor is, on Green Street and across the street at Fugazi Hall. His father-in-law was a real Opera tenor. In the 1950's and 1960's the Opera stars would come to Cavalli Bookstore to have autograph parties. Renata Tebaldi, Mario De Monico, Gigli (the famous tenor) were a few of those who came.

During World War II Cavalli kept a low profile because there were spies in the community. His grandmother and he

(when he was about 9) brought Italian magazines and food to the Italian war prisoners on Angel Island. In the 1930's before Mussolini was captured, Cavalli would broadcast his speeches and Italian speakers would stand out in the street and listen. Italian people talked about politics, sports, etc., when they came to Cavalli. John said there is an old saying, "When three Italians get together, they have five ideas." Italians always love to argue.

There were a few other Italian bookstores like them but they are all "folded" now John says. Al Bacarri has some of their photos of the business in the North Beach Italian Museum. Judith and John looked at various photos of the business together: 1903; 1915; 1934 (where people are listening to the Mussolini speech outside); of his father and grandmother; and of St. Francis Church on Vallejo. A photo was taken by Judith of John J. and Rosanna outside in front of the Cavalli Bookstore at the end of the interview.

(Notes written from recorded audiotape by Rozell Overmire, Telegraph Hill Dwellers Archivist, 3/2/2009)

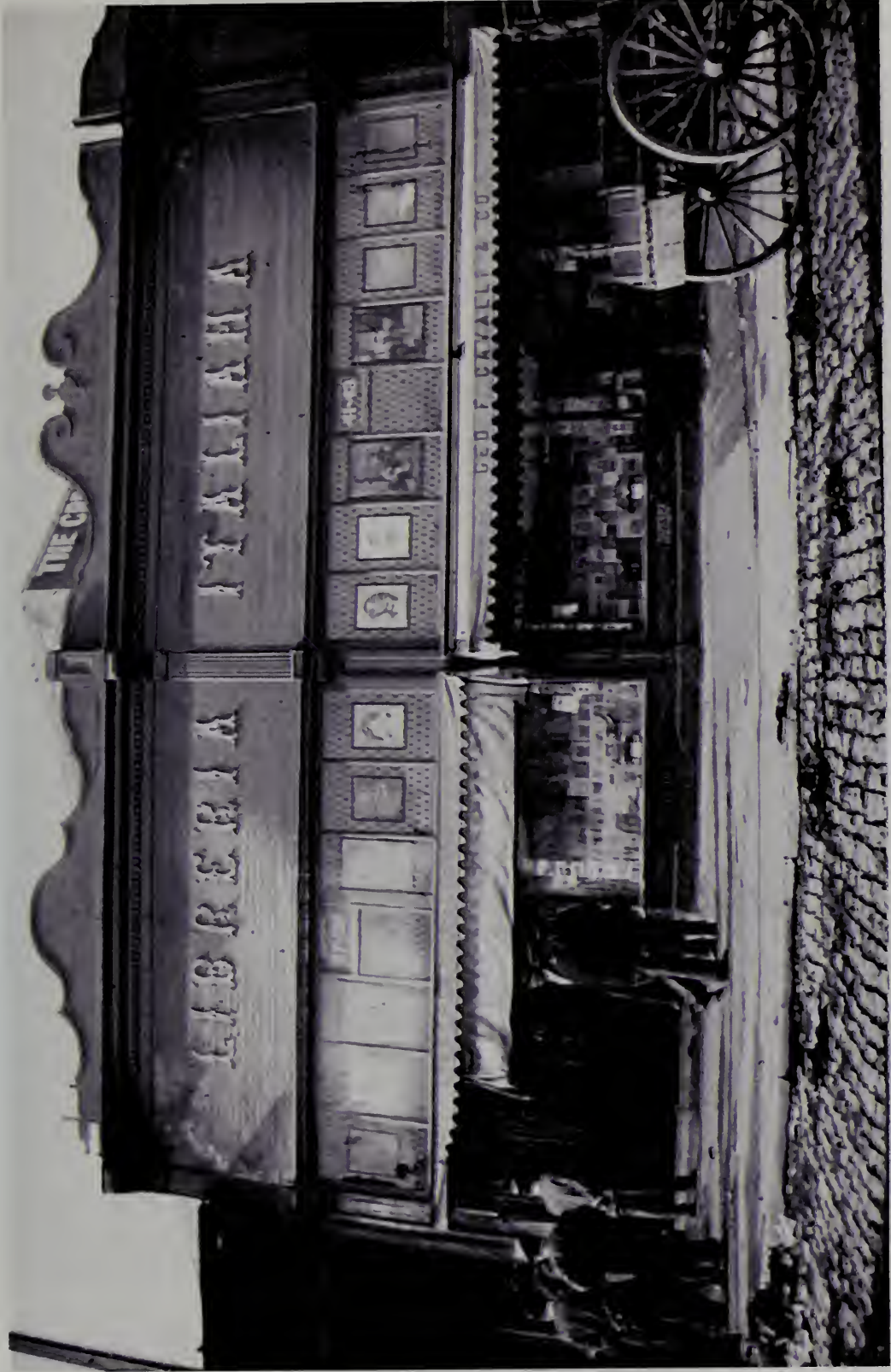
OUR 114th YEAR



**John J Valentini and his wife Rosanna
Photo taken by Judith, at end of interview**



**1880-1888 First location of A. Cavalli Bookstore
Columbus Avenue near present Transamerica Building**



1888-1906 Second location, 37-43 Montgomery Avenue (now Columbus Avenue)
Destroyed in earthquake and fire of 1906



THIRD LOCATION, 1915

1907-1917 Third location, 263 Columbus Avenue
present location of City Lights Bookstore

FOURTH LOCATION, 1922



**1917-1934 Fourth location, 255 Columbus Avenue
Present location of Vesuvio**



Italian men gathered at Cavalli Bookstore to hear radio broadcast of a Benito Mussolini speech



**John Valentini at present location, 1441 Stockton Street – 1999
Located here since 1934**

